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General Ulysses S. Grant was decisive in the American Civil War through his Clausewitzian understanding of the conflict's character, his ability to operationalize President Abraham Lincoln's policy into a matching military strategy of total war, and his relentless execution of its campaigns. General Grant broke the strategic stalemate in 1864 by shifting focus from the prevailing decisive battles to a decisive strategy that targeted the Confederate "trinity" and endorsed President Lincoln in the Union trinity. In difference to his predecessors, Grant as General-in-Chief never challenged Union policy, but devised a unified strategy that attacked the Confederacy in concert throughout all theaters of operations directly, and its enabling resources within the Southern population indirectly. In the end, according to President Lincoln and General Sherman, the difference was not as much the new Union military strategy, but General Grant himself. In this regards, General Ulysses S. Grant merits the continous studies of him and his character to comprehend why he was a great general in the defining conflict of the United States.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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The Decisive General – Ulysses S. Grant and the American Civil War 1864

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: The Decisive General – Ulysses S. Grant and the American Civil War 1864

Author: Major Steinar Dahl

Thesis: Ulysses S. Grant was decisive in the Union victory through his Clausewitzian understanding of the conflict that enabled him to develop a coherent military strategy matching President Lincoln's policy, and his relentless execution of the planned campaigns.

Discussion: The American Civil War progressively changed in character from 1861 to 1865, from a limited war to total war with President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. A Jominian perception of the conflict dominated the Union's military strategy, and resulted in a strategic stalemate until General Ulysses S. Grant's appointment to General-in-Chief in March 1864. Grant developed Clausewitzian perspective of the Civil War, and thus perceived the conflict differently from his peers. His understanding enabled him to connect President Lincoln's policy of "total war" with a matching military strategy. The Union's execution of this strategy defeated the Confederacy in 1864-65, with Grant playing a pivotal role in its success.

Grant gradually developed into an "unconscious" Clausewitzian through his observations of war and conflict from the Mexican War to Chattanooga. His rejection of prescriptive principles like those advocated by Jomini liberated him from the doctrinal bounds that limited his peers. Unlike his predecessors, Grant came to the position of General-in-Chief with extensive command and combat experience. His understanding of the Civil War mirrors the reflections made by Clausewitz in *On War*. Similarly, Grant displayed character traits and skills emphasized by Clausewitz for commanders to be successful in warfare.

Grant's Clausewitzian understanding of the Civil War corresponded with President Lincoln's political vision, and he was able to operationalize this vision into a feasible and concerted Union strategy. Grant was the catalyst in the Union's war-winning strategy in 1864-65, as he proved in his relentless execution of the Overland campaign. The concentric pressure on the Confederate armies combined with a "scorched earth" campaign in the Confederacy's heartland and the attrition of General Robert E. Lee's army, proved decisive in the end militarily and politically.

Conclusion: Ulysses S. Grant proved to be decisive in the Civil War because he understood the conflict in a Clausewitzian context, possessed the ingenuity to develop a military strategy that targeted the strength and weaknesses of the Confederacy, and executed his plan despite operational setbacks. In this sense, Grant himself proved to be the difference, and thus decisive to the Union victory in the American Civil War in 1865.

Preface

The American Civil War remains a monumental conflict in military history. The war itself contains a rare richness in themes, actors, narratives, and areas for research. In many ways, the American Civil War is a micro cosmos of the conflicts we face today. It was limited and total war, and regular and irregular war; which, was passively and passionately embraced by a divided population, and not at least driven by political ideologies on both sides. Our battle staff rides and seminars on the Civil War sparked my desire to study this defining conflict in American history. Like many, I find Ulysses S. Grant to be among the more fascinating figures in the American Civil War. He defeated his adversaries through besieges, swift maneuvers, or bloody attrition. Despite the many excellent studies on his generalship and campaigns, I wanted to explore how his way of thinking about the conflict influenced his success as General-in-Chief in 1864.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my MMS mentor, Dr. Bradford A. Wineman. Thank you for your insight, persistence, and passion for military history and military philosophy. In addition, the Gray Research Center for its superior service, and especially Andrea and Stase deserve special mention for their helpful comments.

Lastly, I have invested time and resources in this MMS at the expense of time with my family. Their support is the true catalyst for this project. Thank you for your patience, love, and relentless support.

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Introduction

The American Civil War's character and warfare changed progressively from 1861 to 1865, and while traditional tactics prevailed on the battlefield, the changing character of the war mandated a change in policy and strategy.[1] The Union policy formally changed with the Emancipation Declaration in July 1863, and its military strategy changed when Ulysses S. Grant became General-in-Chief in March 1864.[2]

The dominant focus on decisive battles on both sides generated a stalemate in the East and a slow Union success in the West, but not a decision to the conflict. The Jominian influence on the Civil War generals separated the military campaign from politics, and the undecided nature of the war changed its character toward a "total war."[3] During his military campaigns in the Western theater, Grant developed a fundamentally different understanding of the conflict than the other Union generals. He eventually saw the enemy as a married whole between the Rebel armies, the population, and the Confederate government. The rebellion rested on the passionate support of the population where a passive majority supported an active minority through their belief in the secessionist cause; and, the Rebel armies gained their strength from the people and less from the Confederate policy. From this, Grant concluded that the Union needed a strategy of complete conquest and not campaigns directed to defeat the Confederate armies alone.[4] Thus, Ulysses S. Grant was decisive in the Union victory through his Clausewitzian understanding of the conflict that enabled to him to develop a coherent military strategy matching President Lincoln's policy, and his relentless execution of the planned campaigns.

In his analysis of Civil War strategy, Donald Stoker concludes that the Union's victory was largely due to its ability to develop strategic responses that addressed the nature of the American Civil War and the character of the Confederacy.[5] General Grant displayed through his campaigns

1

and written reports a firm grasp of the driving forces within the war and their different manifestations within the Union and the Confederacy. He understood better than his adversaries and peers the new character of the Civil War: that it was different from the United States' previous wars and different from those in the history books.

The Clausewitzian understanding of war

Carl Von Clausewitz wrote *On War* as an attempt to understand war and its inner logic. He describes war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."[6] To him, war in its naked form was "nothing but a duel on a larger scale."[7] In order to explain why nations are not at war constantly, fighting whomever and whenever they desire, Clausewitz identified that war contains "an element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone."[8] War is not an act of policy, but a true political instrument and part of the political intercourse. In this sense, he directly links war to the logic and practice of politics. Clausewitz summarized his analysis of war through his visualization of a fascinating trinity in book one:

> War is thus more than a mere chameleon, because it changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case. It is also, however, when it is regarded as a whole and in relation to the tendencies that dominate within it, a fascinating trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; the play of chance and probability, within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to pure reason.[9]

Clausewitz identifies violence, chance, and reason as universal properties of war's nature that are common to all wars regardless of their character and context.[10] They are the driving and mitigating forces of conflict. He then connects these forces to their principal human manifestation: "The first of these three aspects concerns more the people; the second, more the commander and his army; the third, more the government."[11] The forces within the trinity and

their primary representatives exist in a relationship of tension and shifting balance, conditioning each other as the war moves toward victory or defeat.

When viewing the Civil War through Clausewitz's theory, it consisted of two sides with their own particular "Trinity" that shaped their actions, policies, and will to endure the cost of war. The Southern Trinity rested on the passion within the people to continue their "peculiar institution" of slavery, and the people's resistance against the unlawful secession from the Union, and later slavery, defined the Union trinity. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln targeted, among other issues, the Southern institution of slavery with his Emancipation Proclamation. To the Confederacy, the proclamation was the formal announcement of a "total war." Foreign states could no longer intervene in support of the Confederacy without openly advocating the controversial issue of slavery. The Border States faced the same dilemma, and in most of them slavery was a dying institution.[12] Within his own population, Lincoln sought to rally their passion further by targeting slavery. As James McPherson observes, emancipation became "a crucial part of Northern (…) strategy, an important means of winning the war."[13]

President Lincoln also recognized the limited patience found within the Union population to remain "passive," and therefore the need to link military actions to their political reality. He expressed this dilemma between political and military considerations to General Grant in 1864:

> That while armies were sitting down *waiting for opportunities to turn up* [emphasis added] which might, perhaps, be more favorable from a strictly military point of view, the government was spending millions of dollars every day; that there was a limit to the sinews of war, and a time might be reached when the spirits and resources of the people would become exhausted.[14]

Likewise, Grant recognized how each part of the Trinity conditioned the others: while the Rebel army remained the principal way to defeat the Confederate states, the popular support of the Southern people was the key to sustain both the armies and the secessionist cause. He

increasingly recognized the Civil War as something greater than battles alone, and therefore welcomed Emancipation as a means to weaken the Confederate cause.[15]

In order to be an effective instrument of policy, military strategy must comprehend the logic of the policy and the particular characteristics of the war. Clausewitz defined strategy as "the use of engagements for the object of the war."[16] The strategy expresses the aims for the war, the means available to attain them, and the intended level on the use of force to achieve those aims. The use of force translates into his definition of tactics, which was "the use of armed forces in the engagement."[17] Moreover, Clausewitz viewed the conduct of war as the planning and executing of the engagements in a coordinated manner to further the war's objective.[18] From this, he clearly viewed war as a whole, and not a sum of parts. He states, "war should be conceived as an organic whole whose parts cannot be separated, so that each individual act contributes to the whole and itself originates in the central concept."[19] Because political and military objectives must correlate at the highest level, military strategy in turn must direct its chain of engagements toward the ultimate purpose of the war.[20] Clausewitz highlighted this relationship between strategy and policy for the military commander: "to bring a war or one of its campaigns to successful conclusion requires a thorough grasp of national policy. On that level, strategy and policy coalesce: the commander-in-chief is simultaneously the statesman."[21] War and policy exists in a coherent and integrated continuum; and, therefore, the military commander is subordinate to the policymaker, but cannot be a passive servant to him.[22]

A Clausewitzian understanding of conflict, thus, highlights how the different forces within war as expressed by the Trinity makes it irrational, and how war must be a continuation of the given policy in its strategy and engagements. The different contexts influence the conduct of the war in different forms, and through the Clausewitzian lens, the Civil War evolved into a new and

unknown form of war in America. Nevertheless, The dominant perception of the conflict was framed by the ideas and principles of Jomini and not Clausewitz.

The dominant Jominian understanding of war

Antoine-Henri Jomini was the dominant source of military thinking at West Point through Henry W. Halleck's textbook "Elements of Military Art and Science," and Dennis Mahan's tactics curriculum from 1830-71.[23] Jomini perceived war as something that was possible to deconstruct into a set of prescriptive principles.[24] He derived his principles by studying successful campaigns and commanders throughout history, and Napoleon Bonaparte in particular. Jomini viewed his principles as guides to action, and believed that the commander's talent determined their successful application.[25] His influence on the Civil War can be clearly seen in the shared belief between the Confederate Generals James Longstreet, Joseph E. Johnston, and Pierre G.T. Beauregard that the Jominian method needed to define the basic rules of war and conflict in the Civil War.[26]

Jomini advocated a clear separation between warfare and policy. He agreed with Clausewitz that the policymakers must dictate the war's objectives, but once they have declared war, the forced marriage between policy and war needs to be a forced separation in his view. This would protect the military commander from the irrational nature of politics, and allow him to concentrate his talent on the battle ahead of him and his army.[27] The reluctance of many West Point educated generals to allow political considerations govern their military plans further attest to Jomini's influence on Civil War strategy.

Jomini's influence on the Civil War strategy contributed to a prevailing spatially divided outlook on the conflict as a whole, and a concentrated focus on the battle itself. To a large extent, his principles became the rules that governed military action. Thus, Civil War generals looked

for the best suitable terrain to commit to battle based on Jomini's considerations.[28] In the end, his war resembled more a game of chess with "fixed" rules where the best player wins through superior maneuver and positioning.

In contrast to his peers, Grant recognized the futility of prescribed laws and principles for all conflicts when he wrote:

> If the Vicksburg campaign meant anything in a military point of view, it was that there are no fixed laws of war, which are not subject to the conditions to the country, the climate, and the habits of the people. The laws of successful war in one generation would insure defeat in another.[29]

Rather than fixed principles, Grant stressed the conditions of the country and the habits of the people in his framing of the military problem. He conceived that in war and strategy there is no quantifiable and right answer, but only relative answers that remain valid only in their particular context. Likewise, when Grant evaluated the events of the war as whole late in 1863, he refused to list Vicksburg or any other campaign as most decisive. Instead, he identified Emancipation as the greatest blow delivered to the Confederacy due its "moral effects."[30]

Grant's development into a Clausewitzian

The Mexican War (1846-48)

The Mexican War provided Grant with valuable and forming observations on the social and political character of war. Grant perceived the U.S. war with Mexico as unjust, but his sense of duty prevailed over his moral qualms.[31] He also observed first-hand how politics permeate war when President James K. Polk removed General Zachary Taylor and later General Winfield Scott despite their tactical successes for political reasons.[32]

Grant observed how the social weaknesses of the Mexican society enabled a U.S. victory over an enemy that outnumbered and outgunned them.[33] He saw the Mexican army as a reflection of Mexican society, where the poor majority subscribed to a different political cause

than the ruling minority elite. This social structure effectively "crippled" the Mexican army. In a similar manner, Grant observed three different classes of Southern civilians in the Civil War: unionists, secessionists, and neutrals.[34] Southern social differences were less crippling to their army, but remained pivotal to their political cause. The long-term viability of the Confederacy depends more the popular will than the strength of its armies. The popular support often depends on economic and social security, which the armies must protect during war.[35] Grant, influenced by William T. Sherman, would later target the economic and social security of the Southern people in his 1864 strategy.

Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott provided Grant with valuable insights on command and tactics. Taylor commanded with a straightforward manner, and was always assertive with whatever forces and means he had available. As Grant observed in his *Memoirs*, Taylor was "inclined to do the best he could with the means given to him… No soldier could face either danger or responsibility more calmly than he could. These are qualities more rarely found than genius or physical courage."[36] Taylor's style of warfighting favored engaging the enemy, the simple and direct frontal assault.[37] Winfield Scott was in many ways Taylor's direct opposite. Scott's bold strategic move to abandon his base at Vera Cruz, and subsequent march to conquer Mexico City, fascinated Grant with its imagination and result.[38] This represented a clear breakaway from reigning doctrine, and triumphed despite its forecasted failure. During the Civil War, Grant reflects Taylor in his command style and impatience to engage with the enemy, and Scott in his imaginative maneuvers in the Vicksburg campaign and 1864 strategy.

The Battle of Shiloh (1862)

The Battle of Shiloh provided Grant with a broadened understanding of the necessary means required to defeat the Confederacy. First, the Battle of Shiloh showed Grant how

perceptions determine the outcome of battles.[39] At Shiloh, General Pierre G.T. Beauregard surprised him and nearly defeated his army on the first day.[40] When Grant's subordinate commanders wanted to retreat across the river to reorganize, Grant remained steadfast in his belief that he could get the enemy the next day.

This aligns with Clausewitz's observations on boldness, and how a strong mind can turn a situation to its favor. Where the others saw a clear defeat and needed retreat, in line with Beauregard's view of a complete rebel victory, Grant saw opportunity. Before reinforcements reached the field, Grant visited all of his divisional commanders and ordered them to prepare for an attack early in the morning "with their entire divisions."[41] Grant seemed to grasp the moral and physical situation through the fog of war. He was confident in victory, and thus less affected by the surprise of the Confederate attack. It was the severest battle fought in the West to that point in the war, and Grant defeated his enemy by the narrowest margin where, in Russell F. Weigley's words, Grant's "stubborn pugnacity" turned defeat into victory.[42] The large number of Union casualties resulted in mounting criticism against Grant in Washington, to which Lincoln retorted: "I can't spare this man, he fights."[43]

The second and most important lesson was that the Battle of Shiloh made Grant realize that the Civil War was like no war before. There would be no great decisive battle to end the war. Nor would it be a "short" conflict, but a protracted struggle fueled by the enmity within the population. As Grant himself writes it in his *Memoirs*:

> Up to the battle of Shiloh I, as well as thousands of other citizens, believed that the rebellion against the Government would collapse suddenly and soon, if a decisive victory could be gained over any of its armies. [Fort] Donelson and Henry were such victories. (…) But when Confederate armies were collected which not only attempted to hold a line farther south, from Memphis to Chattanooga, Knoxville and on to the Atlantic, but assumed the offensive and made such a gallant effort to regain what had been lost, then, indeed, I gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest.[44]

The Battle of Shiloh cemented Grant's reputation as a relentless fighter with President Lincoln, and demonstrated the fluid state of a battle. It is the commander who decides whether he has been defeated or not, and Grant recognized this to be a fact with the Southern people as well. Complete conquest was the only way to break the will of the South to continue their fight.

The Vicksburg campaign (1862-63)

Grant identifies the fall of Vicksburg as the moment when the Confederacy was certain to defeat.[45] Vicksburg and control of the Mississippi River divided the Confederacy into two, and gave the Union a vantage point to mount its operations further east. Furthermore, Vicksburg provided Grant lessons learned on the operational level of war. He gained experience in coordinating theater level operations, and the prospect of living off the enemy's resources. He employed maneuvers to thwart his enemy, and employed both physical and moral force to his advantage. His determination to succeed proved its merit again. The offensive nature of Grant's plan and his resolute execution sent the Vicksburg campaign into the military history books.

However, the more important observations from the Vicksburg campaign are above the operational level. The reports on futile attempts to gain an advantage over the enemy in the campaign and rumors about Grant's return to excessive drinking, made Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, and President Lincoln send a special envoy, Charles A. Dana, to report on Grant's progress and drinking behavior. General Grant quickly approved of Dana's qualities, and he became the general's trusted political advisor and ally. During the Vicksburg campaign, there was a rumor that Lincoln had dismissed reports on Grant's excessive drinking by inquiring what brand of whisky the general preferred, so he could send a barrel of it to every general in the field.[46] True or false, President Lincoln valued his fighting general in the West.

Furthermore, after the Vicksburg campaign, Grant's perception of necessary military action to defeat the Rebellion turned strategic and total war in its orientation. Grant started to conceptualize operations outside the assigned areas of operation for his army, and consider his enemy as whole.[47] Grant further refined how the population helped sustain the rebellion by other means than their passion for the cause. He perceived that property capable of supporting the rebellion by definition constituted contraband, and therefore was a target for destruction or confiscation. Military stores and weaponry comprised only one of the components supporting the rebellion. Agricultural goods and slaves propped up the Southern war effort and therefore received no protection.[48]

His own logistics had been vulnerable to enemy's irregular warfare, and Grant concluded that Southern logistics must equally vulnerable. He therefore devised a "scorched earth" raiding strategy, where he would send entire armies to completely destroy rather than interdict Southern railroads and forages.[49] He planned to live off the enemy's land as much as possible, since this would consume enemy stores and destroy enemy war potential in the process. Furthermore, Grant no longer saw any value in permanent occupation of territory as it deprived him of fighting forces, and his ideas required manpower to fight and burn the Confederacy to its end.

The last, and perhaps more important lesson for a coming General-in-chief, was how the Union's political needs influenced his own strategy and campaign. Grant clearly recognized this in his *Memoirs*:

> The campaign of Vicksburg was suggested and developed by circumstances. The elections of 1862 had gone against the prosecution of the war. Voluntary enlistments had nearly ceased and the draft had been resorted to; this was resisted, and a defeat or backward movement would have made its execution impossible. A forward movement to a decisive victory was necessary.[50]

The political reality within the Union population, as interpreted by Grant above, required a continuous move forward toward Vicksburg. From this perspective, Grant's persistence and many attempts to seize Vicksburg make sense, and reinforce his understanding of the war as a continuation of policy by other means.

Analysis of Grant as General-in-Chief

From 1861 to 1864, the Civil War changed progressively from a political conflict into a total war waged by the North against the Confederacy. To the Northern population, military actions, in forms of victory or defeat, and political actions, like Emancipation, fueled their emotive interest in the conflict.[51] From this, the working relationship between the different General-in-Chiefs and their Commander-in-Chief becomes the more important one for this study. Grant was the fourth and last General-in-Chief for the Union during the Civil War.

Winfield Scott (1855-1861)

General Winfield Scott was the Union's General-in-Chief when the Confederacy attacked Fort Sumter in April 1861. Scott outlined a strategy to subdue the seceding states through a blockade of the Southern ports and then an advance down the Mississippi River to cut the South in two. Scott combined the announced blockade by President Lincoln with a maneuver utilizing the riverine systems as the highway, suffocating the South like a snake would. Nevertheless, the strategy met ferocious resistance since it was deemed to passive and they wanted a more vigorous prosecution of the war. In the end, President Lincoln did not follow Scott's plan, but adopted a more direct approach to defeat the Confederacy.

General McClellan (1861-62)

George McClellan came to the position of General-in-Chief with great hope and ambition, backed by an impeccable military and civilian record.[52] By all measures, he was a popular and

inspiring choice as General-in-Chief after Scott in November 1861.[53] McClellan saw the war as an issue of illegal secession, and deemed preserving the Union as the critical issue of the war. He believed that bringing the issue of slavery into the conflict would seriously damage the future preservation of the Union and render a compromise with the South impossible.[54] In this way, he understood the Civil War as something more than purely military. But, to make a political solution possible, he decided to keep the conflict contained to the military domain alone. Therefore, he proposed building a large army of 273,000 men to "occupy Richmond (…) crush the rebellion at one blow, terminate the war in one campaign."[55] Like Scott's "Anaconda Plan," McClellan's strategy did not engage the enemy directly and immediately. Thus, his strategy countered the same impatience within the Union population, and did not support President Lincoln's need for tangible military action to retain public support for the war.[56] Nevertheless, the open insubordination to his Commander-in-Chief remains George McClellan's legacy in the Civil War.[57] A general unwilling or unable to serve policy serves no purpose, no matter how great his professional weakness or ability.

Henry Halleck (1862-64)

President Lincoln appointed Henry Halleck to General-in-Chief in July 1862 with high expectations; he was a renowned military scholar and came from the successful front in the Western theater. He was a devoted Jominian, and this guided his thinking about Union strategy. For Halleck, the Civil War was a contest of territory, where the strategic points needed to be seized and secured to win the war.[58] In contrast to the others, Halleck never developed a strategy of his own. After the Union defeat at Second Manassas, Halleck resorted to "war by telegraph" and was General-in-Chief in name only. The field generals became the link between the military strategy and Lincoln's policy.[59] Halleck's passive generalship mismanaged the Union Army into

20 independent field armies, each commander fighting their own war.[60] The Union's massive

mobilization and fielding of armies only increased the prevailing autonomy of the different

armies, and in effect perpetuated a single campaign outlook on the Civil War among Union field

commanders.

Union Operational Context in 1864

The primary task facing Grant when he became General-in-Chief in March 1864 was to

create a strategy that destroyed the rebellion in a manner and timeframe supporting President

Lincoln's re-election in November 1864. Observers on both sides understood and recognized the

links between Grant's performance, Lincoln's reelection, and the realization of Southern war

aims.[61] The Presidential election restored some hope for the Confederacy's strategy to influence

Union policy through military success on the battlefield, thus reinforcing the Democratic Party's

message on the futility of the Civil War.[62] Therefore, in 1864, as in all wars and campaigns, the

political context remained paramount.

When General Grant assumed command in March 1864 the overall situation was as

follows: the Union dominated the Mississippi River and the Charleston Railroads up to

Chattanooga. They controlled the majority of Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia from north

of the Rapidan River. In addition, the Union held several pockets along forts and ports along the

East coast. Despite having divided the Confederacy into two through successful operations in the

West, the Confederacy still held an empire in Grant's mind: "The Balance of the Southern

Territory, an empire in extent, was still in the hands of the enemy."[63] This combined with the

protracted and indecisive stalemate in the East, in the Confederacy's heartland, made Grant

assume that the Rebels claimed every battle fought in the East as their victory.[64] This, in turn, continued to fuel the support for the secession among the Southern population.

His primary instrument, the Union army, consisted of 19 different departments with four of them integrated into a single military division under General William Sherman. The Army of the Potomac was a separate command with no territorial limits. Thus, Grant had 17 different commanders working independently from one another. He expressed concern about the political partisanship within the army and the lack of unity in their effort toward the enemy.[65] This lack of unity and coordination allowed the Confederate commanders to shift their inferior forces to locally better match the superior Union numbers. In Grant's own assessment, this ability to shift forces reduced the impact of Union victories on the Confederate armies morale and not at least the Southern population.[66]

Grant's military strategy

Grant changed the Union's military strategy from individual armies and campaigns to a total and concerted defeat of the Confederacy. He planned to launch a coordinated attack on all rebel armies and enabling resources in the South. This matched Lincoln's idea of applying pressure at many places throughout the front to break the Confederate defense line by employing the Union's superior military strength.[67] From his experience in Mexico and previous campaigns in the Civil War, Grant identified that their resources encouraged the Confederate will to continue to fight a losing battle. Therefore, Grant tailored his hard war strategy to the social system in the South. He ordered his troops to live off the enemy land and resources, and destroy property, farms, railroads, and factories that contributed to the Confederate war effort.[68] Thus, Grant proposed a strategy that targeted the rebel armies directly in a concerted attack, and the

population's support for the rebellion indirectly through their resources in a manner Archer Jones defines as "political attrition."[69]

Grant had previously offered a similar plan to then General-in-Chief Halleck in December 1863, where he proposed a campaign plan for North Carolina based on a massive raiding strategy. He advocated a thrust from Chattanooga towards Raleigh and then Wilmington. This would break the Virginia stalemate in Grant's mind, because it would threaten General Lee's communications and force him to turn from Washington toward Grant's army.[70] Halleck rejected the proposal because it allowed the enemy to operate along interior lines and divided the Union army on exterior lines.[71] President Lincoln rejected the proposal because it did not address his concern about engaging the Army of Northern Virginia, and he failed to see that it remained the objective indirectly.[72]

In Grant's mind, the two key enemy armies were the Army of Northern Virginia under General Robert E. Lee facing the Army of the Potomac, and the Rebel army under General Joseph E. Johnston facing General Sherman at Chattanooga.[73] Furthermore, the Confederates needed to guard the Shenandoah Valley, which provided their main line of communications from Richmond to Tennessee. In addition to Lee and Johnston's armies, the Confederate armies and their generals were General Leonidas Polk in the Mississippi, General Edmund K. Smith in Shreveport, and Mobile defended by General Henry Maury.

Grant's overall plan was that General George G. Meade would attack Robert E. Lee's army and pursue him regardless of direction, to keep him on the defensive and deny him the ability to reinforce to the West.[74] General William Sherman would attack General Joseph E. Johnston's army and advance on the city of Atlanta, and in effect prevent him from reinforcing Lee.[75] General Franz Sigel would move into the Shenandoah Valley and destroy enemy storages and

the railroad, and thereby fix a large enemy force.[76] General Benjamin Butler was to conduct an amphibious landing south of the James River, and then advance on the Confederate capital Richmond coordinated with the Army of the Potomac.[77] General Nathanial P. Banks was to move on Mobile and General Maury supported by Admiral David Farragut and the Union navy. In essence, Grant operationalized Lincoln's vision of "those not skinning can hold a leg."[78]

Grant's strategy for the 1864 campaigns was different from that conceived by McClellan and Halleck. First, Grant sought to pressure the Confederate armies together at once, in a form of concentric pressure directed toward the two main Rebel armies, as well as the other enemy armies further west. This was the first Union strategy to concert actions across theaters.

Second, Grant tasked William Sherman, and later Philip Sheridan, to execute a "scorched earth" strategy with their armies to make the Southern population feel the true costs of secession. Their "scorched" earth approach left the Southern areas empty in their wake. They never targeted the population itself, but targeted their resources that indirectly contributed to keeping the rebellion alive. In their wake, despair followed with the destroyed crops and communications, and in front of them, the rumor of terror provided a psychological advantage over their enemy.

Third, the Union armies no longer sought a decisive battle, but were to follow a "decisive strategy:" engage and follow their counterpart, and to destroy the resources keeping him alive in the process. It was a strategy of political maneuver through tactical attrition. Grant wanted his armies to "eat" their way through the enemy's armies and resources.

Grant versus Lee: the Overland Campaign

The Overland campaign was the first duel between each side's most successful commanders, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, and more importantly the campaign on which both sides pinned their principal hopes for victory.[79] In the first days of May, Grant and Lee set

their armies in action, both hoping to catch their enemy in motion and force battle.[80] As a result, the armies more or less stumbled into each other, resulting in the entangled engagement known as the Battle of the Wilderness. The tough terrain mitigated the numerical superiority of the Union army, and the arrival of General Longstreet pushed the battle in favor of the Confederates.[81] Lee inflicted 17,600 casualties on the Union for about 7,500 of his own.[82] The Union lost the tactical engagement of the Wilderness. Nevertheless, Grant achieved one of his strategic objectives for the advance: engaging Lee's army. Furthermore, unlike any other Union general Lee had met, Grant did not retreat to reorganize and reset his plan. Instead, Grant turned Lee's flank to the east and headed south, and this in turn invigorated the spirit of the Union troops.[83] More importantly, Grant introduced something new to the Eastern theater and General Robert E. Lee: continuous battle.[84]

Lee intercepted Grant's turning movement at Spotsylvania Court House and this reinforced his perception of Grant's plan and himself (again) being the victorious commander. Lee's interception of the Army of the Potomac led to a week of bloody fighting at the crossroads of Spotsylvania Court House.[85] The Confederate line of entrenchments, the "Bloody Angle," could not be broken.[86] In Lee's mind, he was outmaneuvering Grant and avoiding major engagements as directed by President Davis.[87] Despite inflicting more casualties on the Union Army, which was almost twice the size of Lee's army, Lee actually sustained a higher ratio of losses than Grant.[88] Lee was slowly becoming victim to Grant's attrition.

At this point in the campaign, Robert E. Lee perceived himself the winning side due to the his victories and successful countering of Grant's turning movements. On the other side, Grant despite losing the engagements, continued to pursue a strategy of attrition against Lee because his numerical superiority enabled him to sustain a higher rate of losses and still grind away at

Lee's strength. At the same time, the supporting efforts in Virginia failed under the two political generals Benjamin Butler and Franz Sigel. Both failed to execute their part within Grant's overall intent, and Grant's plan was diverging rather than converging in the East.[89]

Still, Grant pressed on and turned Lee's flank again after Spotsylvania, and Lee countered his movement again due to shorter Confederate lines. Lee's inability to lock Grant into a major and decisive battle, and Grant's relentless push forward despite being bloodied in the previous battle, brought the Army of the Potomac closer to a position of defeating Lee by numbers alone, or seizing the Confederate capital and the Army of Northern Virginia in the process.[90]

Grant and Lee dueled each other in casualties, terrain, and confidence. Their physical duel was measured in blood and miles as the Army of the Potomac crept forward. Their moral duel was of a larger magnitude, measured in confidence in oneself and the army's ability to persevere. Grant was pushing a strategy of attrition against Lee, and in a determined recognition of the necessary measures in front of him, he continued to grind away at his enemy's capacity to continue the fight.[91] Grant did not seek a decisive battle, but the destruction of Lee's army. He remained confident that the Army of the Potomac's bloodied advance on Lee and Richmond was feasible, and was confident that neither he nor Lincoln would yield to the enemy on will or resources.[92] To Grant, there was no other way forward, other than through the Army of Northern Virginia. As Lincoln commented to his private secretary after the Battle of the Wilderness: "I believe if any other general had been at the head of that army it would have been on this side of the Rapidan. It is the dogged pertinacity of Grant that wins."[93]

Grant's decisive contribution to Union victory

Clausewitz claimed that the most important quality in a great commander was his strong mind to act in the face of the unknown.[94] Intellect and courage were important, but the ability to

rise above adversity and persist on a course of action was far more powerful. Grant displayed a relentless execution of own plans in a number of campaigns and battles, from the Battle of Shiloh to the bloody Overland campaign. General Sherman described Grant's persistence when he wrote, "But I tell you where he beats me, and he beats the world. He don't care a damn for what the enemy does out of his sight, but it scares me like hell."[95] In the words of Clausewitz, Grant possessed both the physical and moral courage necessary to overcome the friction of war.

Furthermore, Grant's rejection of prescriptive principles enabled him to see matters differently than his peers. His written orders and after action reports show an organized mind, able to receive complex information and reframe it into a simple and comprehensible form.[96] This echoes Clausewitz's observation, "where a simple point of view and plain language are sufficient, it would be pedantic and affected to make them complex and involved."[97] Grant shared Lincoln's understanding of the conflict, and he further developed his insight into a military strategy of aggressive attack against the Confederate armies and "political attrition" of the Southern will to continue the fight. Grant's own outline of his strategy before the 1864 offensive illustrates his comprehension of the ends, ways, and means to the conflict:

> Here then is the basis of all plans formed at the outset. First to use the greatest number of troops practicable against the Armed force of the enemy. To prevent that enemy from using the same force at different seasons, against first one Army and than another, and to prevent the possibility of repose for refitting and producing the necessary supplies for carrying on resistance, Second: to hammer continuously at the Armed force of the enemy, and his resources, *until by mere attrition, if in no other way* [emphasis added], there should be nothing left to him but an equal submission with the loyal section of our common country to the universal law of the land.[98]

His simple outline represents a complex idea that targets their armies, their resources, and their will, if necessary by attrition, but aimed at submission to the Union rather than destruction.

The 1864 campaign plan reflects a developed understanding of the Civil War's driving forces and the necessary means to defeat the Confederacy. To Grant, there was no other way than actual fighting to end the conflict:

> I do not know any way to put down this rebellion and restore the authority of the Government except by fighting, and fighting means that men must be killed. If the people of this country expect that the war can be conducted to a successful issue in any other way than by fighting, they must get somebody other than myself to command the army.[99]

In a Clausewitzian sense, Grant's 1864 campaign represents the duel between the Union and the Confederacy at all levels. There was no other solution than a complete conquest, and there was no other way than actually fighting the Confederate armies, their resources, and the social system that enabled the Secessionist cause. Lincoln and Grant rejected the idea that the mere capture of places defined victory as long as intact armies supported by a politically committed population remained.[100]

Grant recognized the 1864 campaign's pivotal importance to President Lincoln's reelection and by extension the Union policy.[101] Similar to Vicksburg in 1862, Grant understood that there was no other option than to press forward and fight. Thus, Grant displayed boldness, and above all unprecedented determination in the Overland Campaign. Despite the fact that his overall campaign plan fractured already in its first move, Grant pressed on with confidence on his ability to defeat Robert E. Lee. Clausewitz describes boldness as more important on the higher levels of command, because he viewed its quality as more necessary at higher levels because the greater the risk, the more profound effect would it have on the war. Where McClellan and Halleck developed their plans, but faltered in execution, Grant refused to let the possible actions of his enemy dictate his strategy; instead, he sought to inflict his will on the enemy commander.

The major difference between Grant and Halleck was that while Halleck was an excellent staff officer, he likely did not possess the stamina or the necessary understanding of the war itself

to execute Grant's strategy in 1864.[102] Furthermore, Halleck's negative view on the forced marriage between politics and military operations prevented him from engaging in substantive discussion with President Lincoln and Edwin M. Stanton on matters of policy. Thus, he never envisioned nor acted outside the military realm.

Like Halleck, McClellan did not prove himself in direct battle command. Grant sympathized with the young general, and remarked that the vast and cruel responsibility thrust upon a young and inexperienced McClellan as terrifying.[103] McClellan had a brilliant mind, and his operational planning was in many ways superb.[104] However, his perception of the war remained too limited since he sought a decisive battle as described by Jomini's principles and demonstrated by Napoleon. From an operational perspective, John Waugh observes that "Whatever the reason, McClellan was not a bold attacker, which in the end a great general must be. In him, boldness always gave ground to caution."[105] In this regard, Grant's natural aggressiveness made him McClellan's direct opposite.

Conclusion

Ulysses S. Grant was an "unconscious" Clausewitzian in the way he framed the Civil War, and connected the different elements within the Confederacy's Trinity to the secessionist cause. Grant determined that the Confederacy's political cause was doomed from its conception due to the social context of the secessionist states, their independence within the greater cause of secession, and the prevailing social context of slavery benefitting only the elite of the South. He recognized the emotive force residing in the Southern people, feeding their Rebel armies to fight the numerical superiority of the Union army.

Grant was instrumental in the Union's change in focus from decisive battles in independent theaters to a coherent decisive strategy. His understanding of the Civil War as something more

than military alone and his ability to translate this into a feasible strategy were not present among other generals on his level. Grant gradually developed his understanding of the Civil War as a different conflict, one where there would be no decisive battle, but something new that required complete conquest of the Rebel armies and Southern will. He shared Lincoln's political reason and position against slavery, and possessed the moral courage and will to persist through tactical defeats and strategic fog of politics.

Grant, in contrast to McClellan and Halleck, accepted and complied with the political landscape that politics provided the Union army in 1864. The politics of war, where political generals got command of field armies in exchange for political support, was not the desirable course of action, but nevertheless an acceptable solution to Grant. He understood that politics not only permeated the conflict, but the conduct of war as well. Lincoln conceptualized the Confederate armies as the main objective for the Union armies in 1862, where the Northern population cried for retribution against the Rebel armies after First Bull Run. Nevertheless, before Ulysses S. Grant became commanding general, the Union pursued a piecemeal effort in its approach to the defeat the Confederacy.

Grant's strength of character and "iron will" provided President Lincoln and the Union with the talented fighter they needed. In an almost symbolic link to Washington, Grant's elevation of the conflict from single campaigns to concerted pressure across theaters of operations against both armies and population proved to be the decisive factor in the end. Grant's Clausewitzian understanding coupled with military genius permitted him to excel in the new character of the Civil War, and to operate within the logic of politics. Grant recognized the complexities of supreme command and the art of the possible in contributing to victory in a long and difficult war. He coordinated and balanced changing political, societal and military

imperatives and reflected those changes in a flexible military strategy achieving political

goals.[106]

In the end, his Clausewitzian understanding of the Civil War as something different,

something total in the way it relied on society as a whole to persist was the instrumental factor in

the shift from single battles to a decisive strategy of total war. In relation to Lincoln and the

Union cause, it was not Grant's strategy or ability to support his political masters that made the

difference – in many ways it was Ulysses S. Grant himself that made the difference.

Appendix A: The overall situation in the American Civil War in February 1864
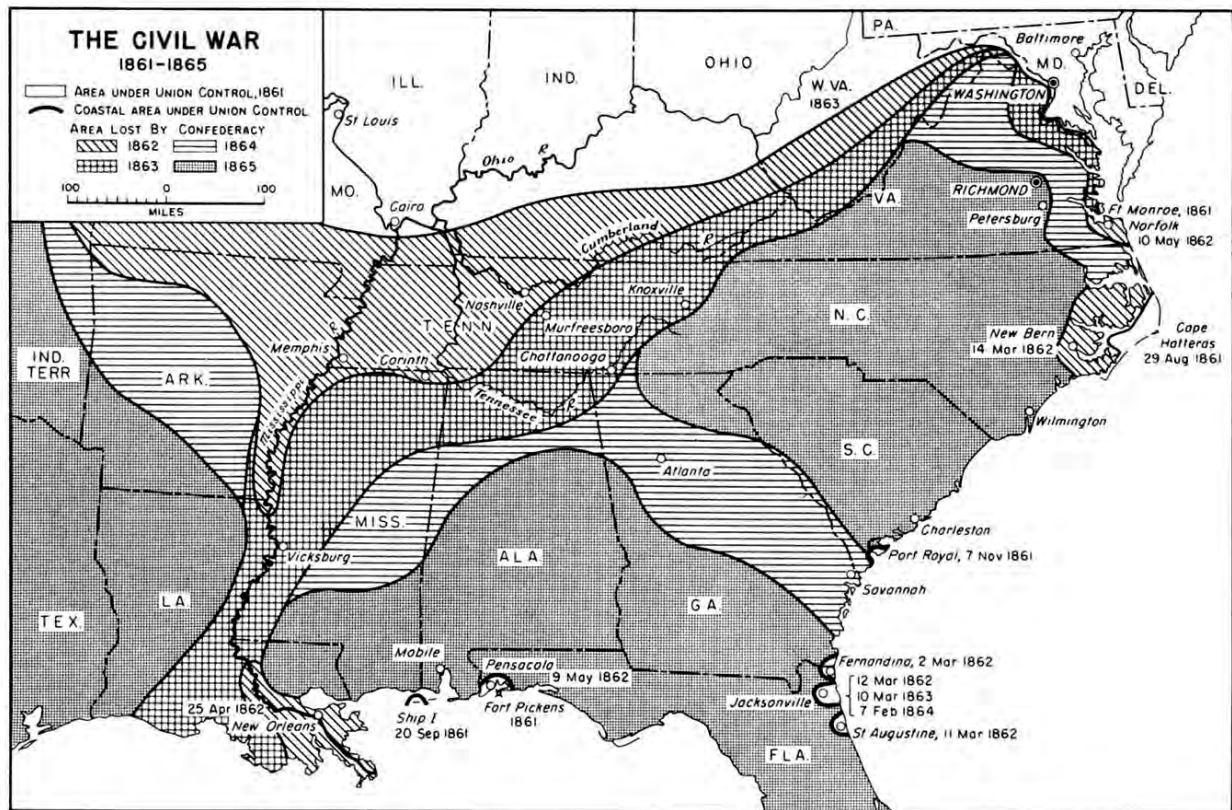
Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History. *Wilderness-Spotsylvania Battle Staff Ride Guide*.

Appendix B: The Union army with commanders and departments February 1864

Union Army Organization April 1864

XXXXXX

GRANT

XXXX — BANKS

XXXX — BUTLER

XXXXX — SHERMAN

XXXX — MEADE

XXXX — SIGEL

XXX — BURNSIDE

XXXX — THOMAS

XXXX — MCPHERSON
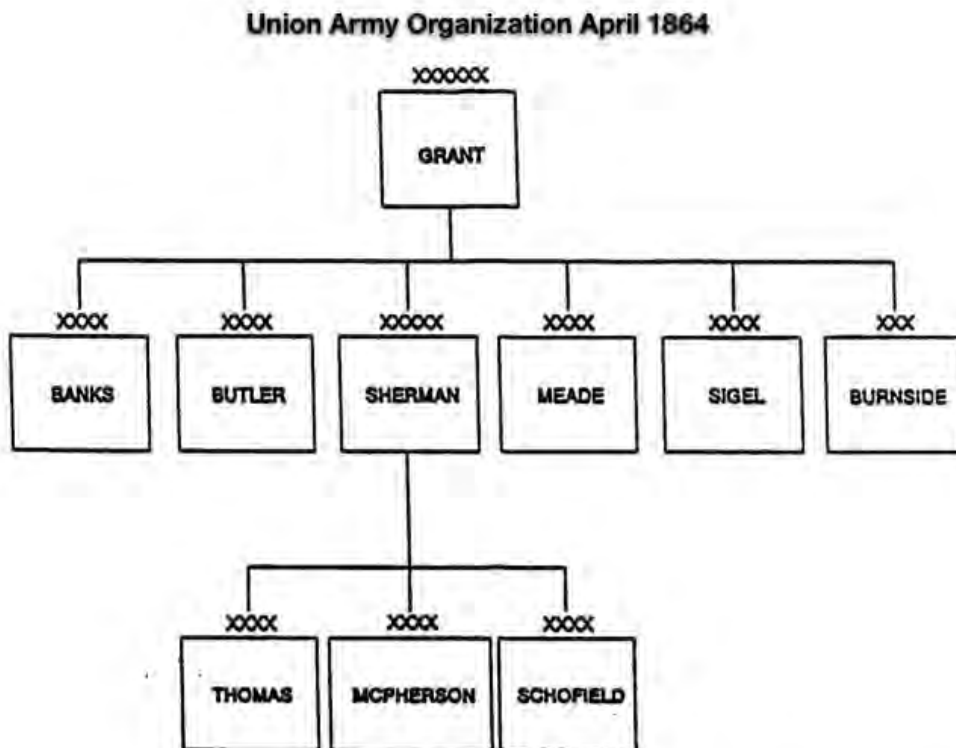
XXXX — SCHOFIELD

Note: Sherman's "Army Group" is considered as such strictly from a command and control/organizational perspective. It was, in fact, smaller than the Army of the Potomac with Schofield and McClellan's armies, for example, consisting of only one Corps in the former and two in the latter. Same can be said of Sigel's army in that it consisted of Ord's VIII Corps and a mixed force under Crook. In all of these armies the title of army was retained for morale, and no doubt, the ego of the commanders. Often criticized for over extending his assets, note the absence of a strategic reserve in Grant's plan.

Sherman	Department of the Mississippi
Thomas	Army of the Cumberland
Schofield	Army of the Ohio
McPherson	Army of the Tennessee
Banks	Department of the Gulf/Red River Expedition
Butler	Army of the James
Meade	Army of the Potomac
Sigel	Army of West Virginia

FIGURE 7

Source: Discussion with Dr. William Glenn Robertson, USACGSC - CSI and Grant as Military Commander by J. Marshall-Cornwall.

36

Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History. *Wilderness-Spotsylvania Battle Staff Ride Guide*.

Appendix C: Grant's Union military strategy 1864
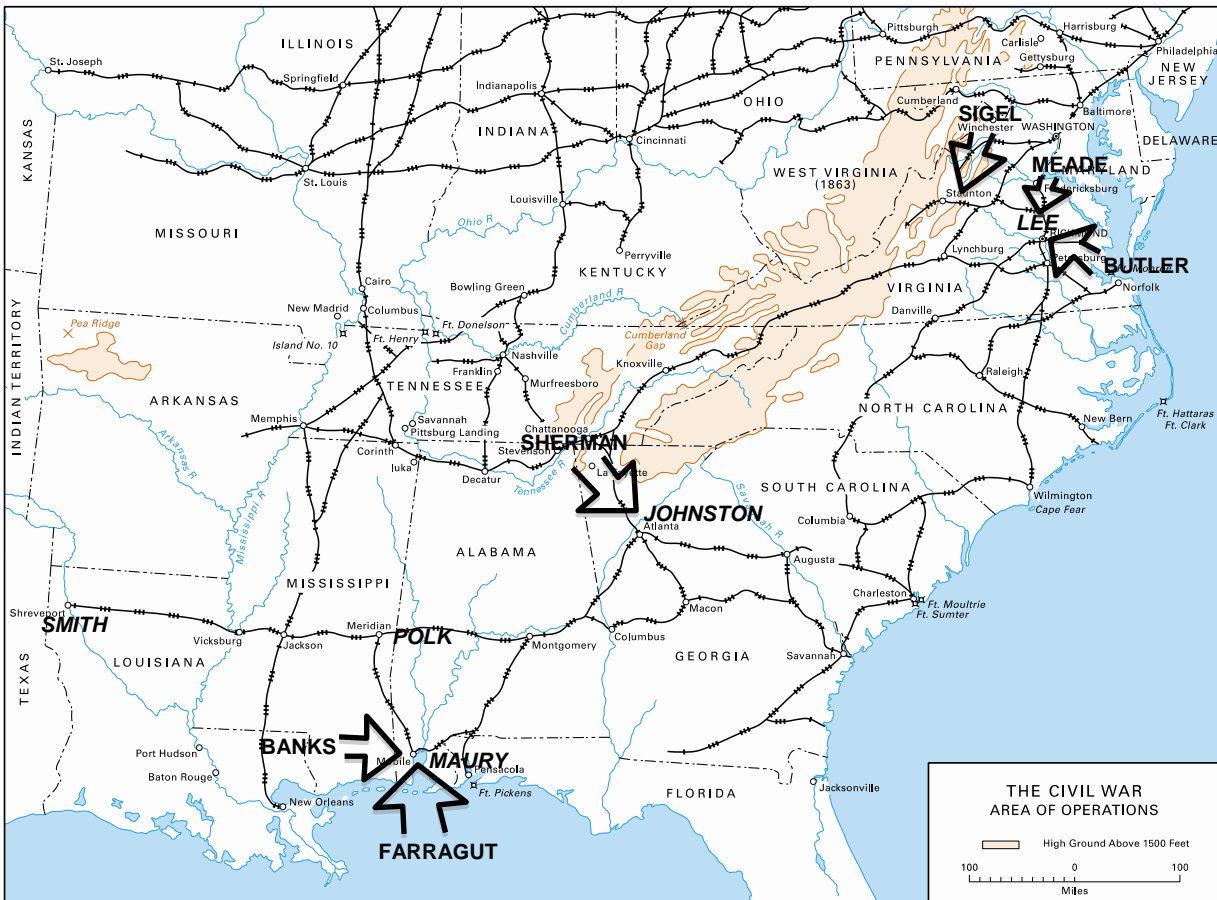
Source: Donald Stoker. *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 350.
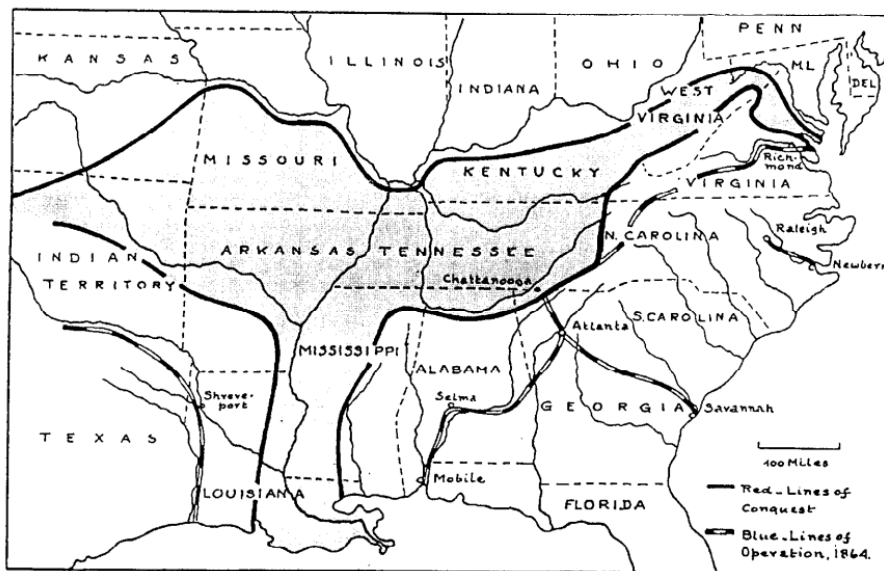
GRANT'S STRATEGICAL MAP FOR HIS 1864 CAMPAIGN

Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History. *Wilderness-Spotsylvania Battle Staff Ride Guide*.

Appendix D: Civil War chronology 1864-1865

CIVIL WAR CHRONOLOGY, 1864-APR 1865

1864	EAST			WEST
	ARMY OF THE JAMES	ARMY OF THE POTOMAC	OPERATIONS IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY	
JAN				
FEB				
MAR				
APR				Red River Expedition
MAY	Butler Advances; Butler "Bottled Up" at Bermuda Hundred	Grant Advances; Wilderness; Spotsylvania; North Anna; Cold Harbor; Crossing of the James	Sigel Advances; New Market; Sigel Relieved	Sherman Advances; Tunnel Hill; Resaca-Dalton
JUN	Attack on Petersburg		Lynchburg	New Hope Church; Kenesaw Mountain
JUL		The Mine	Monocacy; Washington; Kernstown	Chattahoochee Crossing; Hood Replaces Johnston; Battles North and East of Atlanta
AUG			Sheridan in Command	Sherman Swings to the West; Combat South of Atlanta
SEP			Winchester; Fisher's Hill	Hood Evacuates Atlanta; Hood Moves West to Alabama; Sherman Follows Hood North
OCT		Siege of Petersburg	Cedar Creek	Operations Against Union L of C; Sherman Returns to Atlanta / Hood to Teuscumbia
NOV				March to the Sea; Hood Invades Tennessee; Spring Hill
DEC				Savannah; Franklin; Nashville; Hood Back in Alabama
1865				
JAN				Sherman Moves North
FEB				Columbia
MAR		Lee's Assault; Five Forks	Sheridan Joins Grant	Fayetteville; Goldsboro
APR		Lee Surrenders		Armistice; Johnston Surrenders

Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History. *Wilderness-Spotsylvania Battle Staff Ride Guide*.

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[7] Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

[8] Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

[9] Christopher Bassford, "Tip-Toe Through the Trinity, the Strange Persistence of Trinitarian Warfare," (manuscript, Clausewitz.com, 2011, http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/Trinity/Trinity8.htm#Inst).
Bassford's translation of the central part of Clausewitz's section "28. Consequences for Theory" in Book One, differs slightly from Howard and Paret's translation. Bassford argues that part of Clausewitz's original meaning is lost in translation of the former, and therefore altered in his paper. His translation with his changes in bold from Howard and Paret: "War is thus more than a **mere** chameleon, because it **changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case**. It is also, however, when it is regarded as a whole and in relation to the tendencies that dominate within it, a **fascinating trinity**—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; the play of chance and probability, within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to **pure reason**." Howard and Paret's translation: Clausewitz, *On War*, 89. Clausewitz rewrote book one after he finished his other chapters, and thus he summarizes in general his major findings on war as a phenomenon in the trinity.

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[11] Bassford, "Tip-Toe Through the Trinity," textbox 1.
In difference to Howard and Paret, Bassford adds "more" in front the agent, so it becomes "(…) concerns more the people" and therefore less exclusively tied to one agent as in Howard and Paret's translation.

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[32] Grant, *Memoirs,* 81.

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